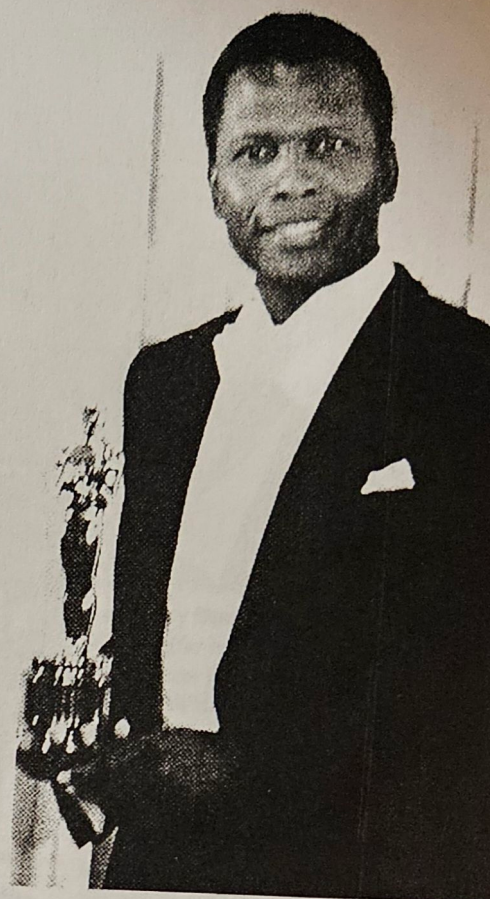


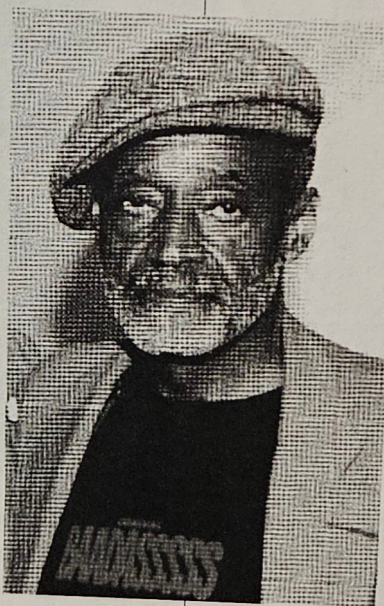
Lights, Camera & The Black Role In Movies

By Melvin Van Peebles



WHEN I first became aware of movies messing with my mind, I was a kid. I just couldn't connect the elegant Negro I saw in the pages of EBONY, a brand new magazine at the time, or the Black people strutting around my neighborhood with the "cullud folks" the movies portrayed. On the South Side of Chicago, the men were hardworking, tough and fearless, not shuffling, quaking buffoons, and the women were majestic, regal queens, not obsequious mammies, huffing and puffing over washtubs on the silver screen.

Then, all of a sudden, just as the Second World War was just winding down, the radio and newspapers started talking about Hollywood turning over a new leaf and a "New Negro" coming to the screen. Well, what had happened was that to win the war, the government needed everybody's help, and it had done a lot of flag-waving to unite the nation, lots of talk about the United States being a melting pot with "Liberty, Equality and Justice For all," regardless of "Race, Creed, or Color." In the flush of the upcoming victory, America was experiencing a wave of democracy, a bit of which lapped up onto the shores of the movie industry, hence Hollywood's promise to depict Negro characters

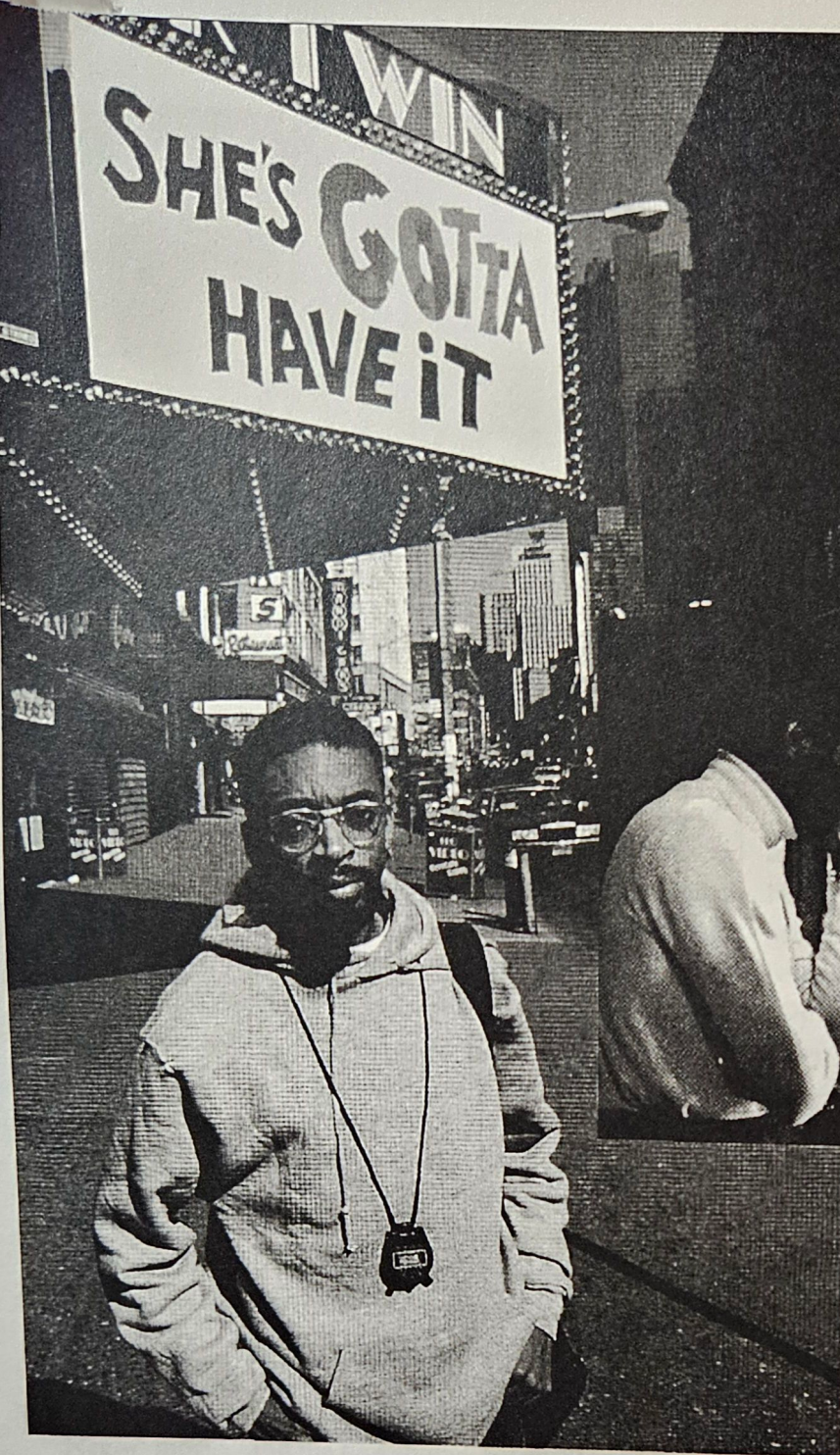


with more dignity, i.e., the "New Negro." (Implicit, of course, if Hollywood could invent the "New," it meant it had invented the "Old.") Be that as it may, Tinsel Town strutted around with its chest poked out feeling pretty proud of itself for being so progressive.

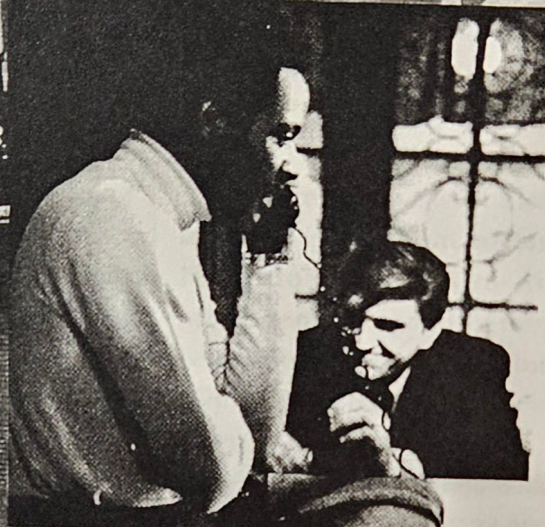
Okay, the "New" treatment of the Negro was slightly more sophisticated, but the sad fact was the insults had only gone underground, and were more insidious and damaging psychologically than ever. There lurking underneath the rhetoric was the same ole paternalistic attitude, the same ole racism.

Hollywood trotted out a number of movies dealing with what White folks liked to call the "Negro Problem." Each film had a moral lesson about justice and tolerance, always with a central sympathetic White character—a doctor, a teacher, or something like that, a liberal update of the function of kindly slave owner, or Little Miss Shirley Temple in the "old Negro" movies.

Remember? There was *Pinky*, played, of course, by a White actress. Pinky and this White guy fall in love. He offers to take her away as long as she doesn't tell anybody about being colored; she turns him down, but all is not lost because a kindly ole White lady leaves her plantation to

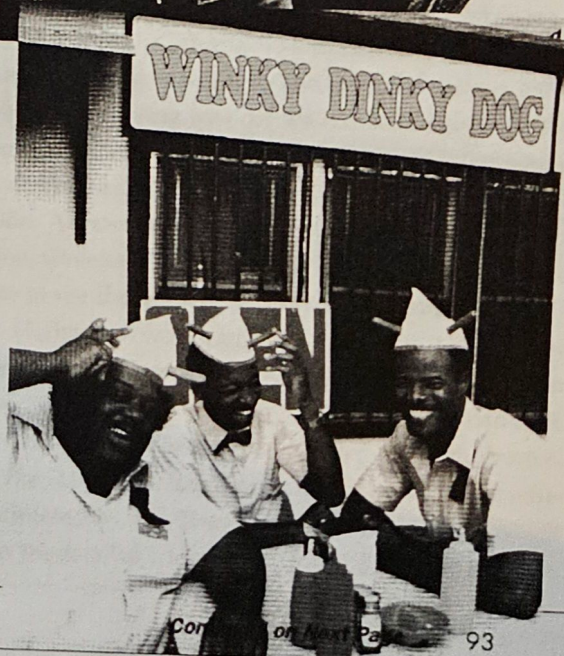


Legendary filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles (far left) touched on a wide range of Black Hollywood in his article. The 60 years that he wrote about included Sidney Poitier (opposite page, top) becoming the first Black person to win an Oscar for Best Actor, filmmaker Spike Lee (far left), Richard Roundtree in *Shaft* (left), legendary team Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee (top), and popular films such as *Cooley High* (below) and *Hollywood Shuffle* (bottom).



Pinky when she dies. There was *Lost Boundaries*, a light-skinned Negro, played once again by a White actor, passes himself off as a real bona fide White man to become a doctor. Eventually the truth comes out and he is ostracized by the White folks, but through the intervention of a sweet White minister who devotes a sermon to the subject of tolerance, the "Christian hearts" of the townspeople are open and he regains his practice. Another one was *Home of the Brave*. A Black G.I. suffers from shell shock and can't walk, but he is cured by a White psychiatrist who explains to him that it is all in his head. However, that doesn't do the trick, so he calls him the N-word and the Black G.I. gets up and walks. There were others. Hollywood even did one called *Black Like Me*, where a White actor, played a guy who put on shoe polish or something and went down South to experience what a Black man had to go through.

Hollywood was not only racist, it was sexist, too. There are a zillion





Filmmaking brothers Warrington and Reginald Hudlin and director/producer John Singleton (right) have widened the image of Black America with their films. They are among a growing number of African-American filmmakers who are making a statement in Hollywood.

books documenting the mistreatment of actresses at the hands of the misogynist moguls, the inequities in pay, parts, power, etc. You can bet your bottom dollar if things were harsh for White women, it was infinitely worse for women of color, restricted to tragic-wanton-mulatto roles, or doing the dishes, or minding Miss Ann's babies. But rarely, even today, are the tribulations of Black actresses ever mentioned.

The "New Negro" concessions were only tactical in nature. During the '40s, '50s and on into the '60s, it was business as usual with Hollywood clinging to the clichés of the past. The long-term, strategic objective of undermining the Negro struggle and protecting the myth of "White supremacy" remained untouched. The only bright spot I can recall was Sam, the colored piano player in *Casablanca*. It was the only time I ever saw a Black character go through an entire movie without having to give a speech about equality-coming-soon, or kiss-butt. In the ghetto, the people were so proud that they would make the projectionist stop and run Sam's part over and over again.

Colored folks didn't exactly stampede to see the "new Negro" movies, and the film studios got an attitude at our ingratitude. They declared that the colored audience had a chip on its shoulder and that they were giving up on trying to appease us "ungrateful, belly-aching darkies." We almost disappeared from the silver screen and went from the "new Negro" to the "No Negro."

But the boycott couldn't last because Tinsel Town knew that there was money burning in those Black pockets, and they wanted some of it. Hollywood passed the baton to Sidney Poitier. Sidney was a wonderful actor, and we were proud, but nobody could really relate because the characters he was given to play were surreal, more from heaven than the 'hood.

Then Hollywood noticed that if they used a Black guy in an action movie, putting him somewhere in a posse or platoon of good guys and not killing him off too soon, not until

somewhere in the last reel, the Negro audience would come. In fact, this invention of the Black sidekick-hero was the precursor of the "salt and pepper" buddy movies of today.

In the meantime, as our label was on its way to becoming African-American, metamorphosed from Cullud, to Negro to Black to Afro-American, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, and Hollywood, responding to pressure from the federal government, "Opened the floodgates of cinematic opportunity." Well, sorta.

Every guild and union, which up to then had been lily-White, hired a minority as an apprentice, promising that perhaps in say 100 years, one of their grandchildren might even get a chance—since filmmaking was such a complicated, intricate affair—to actually touch the reins of creativity.

Speaking of "actually," from the very beginning, there had already been some Black folks making films, from the silent era of moviemaking on up into the early days of the talkies. Once upon a time, ironically, during segregation, a Black film industry had existed, and there had been a Golden Age of Black Cinema. The films catered to the all-colored movie houses and there had been more than 300 of them. But Black cinema was driven out of business by the rocketing cost of moviemaking, due to the arrival of sound and the disappearance of all-Black theaters as a result of integration. Although made on a shoestring, these Black-made films were extremely popular with Black audiences, desperate to see themselves portrayed as human beings.

While Hollywood was dragging its feet about letting any power out of White hands—BLAM—I show up at the San Francisco Film Festival with my African-American-self, with my mahogany rear-end, as a delegate from France, carrying *The Story Of A Three Day Pass*, a French feature written and directed by me. The film itself was a big success; it even won the festival's top honor, the CRITICS CHOICE.

Black Oscar Milestones

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1947: James Baskett receives an Honorary Award at the 20th Annual Academy Awards ceremony for his performance in *Song of the South* in 1946.

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1989: Denzel Washington wins Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Glory* at the 62nd Academy Awards.

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The you-know-what hit the fan, but it wasn't about my movie. The scandal was that I had had to leave the U.S.A. to have an opportunity. Immediately Hollywood greeted me with open arms, falling all over itself to prove it wasn't racist. Every studio offered me a film to direct. I didn't have a job, but the way I figured it, if I had said yes too soon, Hollywood would have had their "token Negro" and nobody else would have gotten a shot. So I said "No" to force their hand ... it worked.

BINGO/ABRACA-DAB-BRA—Two

great talents who had proven themselves over and over and who had been trying to break into directing for years were "suddenly" discovered. Ossie Davis made *Cotton Comes To Harlem* and

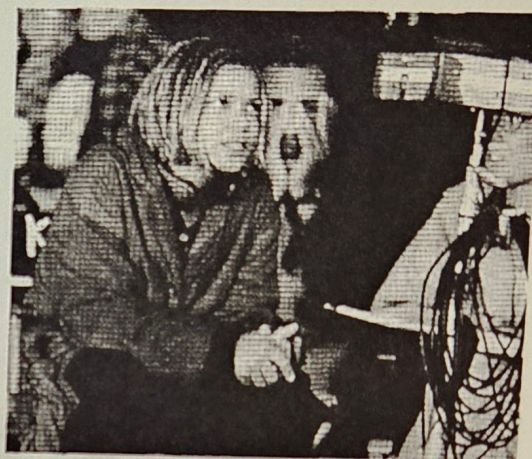
Gordon Parks made *The Learning Tree*.

After they got in, I felt free to accept an offer and directed a comedy called *Watermelon Man*. All three of our films did respectable business at the box-office. But respectable business or not, I was tired of clueless White folks imposing their vision of the universe on me, so I wrote *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. I had a three-picture deal, but they tore up my contract. All the other studios thought I had gone nuts and turned me down, too. So I did it myself.

The movie was a take-no-prisoners political manifesto; the Black Panthers even made it required viewing for all their members. It was the largest-grossing independent film up to that time. It was a huge financial success and Hollywood was changed forever. The rush for Black bucks was back on ... they took my formula, flipped the revolutionary message to a counter-revolutionary one by making the hero a maverick detective or undercover agent, in actuality a subliminal extension of the status quo and—VOILA—the Blaxploitation movie was born. Nevertheless, Blaxploitation did have a silver lining. The studios realized that the ante had



The corps of African-American directors in Hollywood includes George Tillman Jr. (*Soul Food*) and Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*).



been upped and that they could no longer just "fake it," and in the name of authenticity, they began to hire African-Americans in other important creative capacities other than actor or director.

However, getting some sepia hands on the reins of creativity was only half of what I had in mind. I also wanted to prove to Black folks that we could do it by ourselves, without Massa's grants, blessings or anything else. When the movie turned out to be a box-office success, I thought that it would only be a matter of minutes before an army of homeys would come storming up the hill to help tear down the walls of Hollywood.

I waited for reinforcements to arrive—weeks, months, years rolled by...the majority of Black filmmakers were still being denied the big prize. Every now and then an African-American would manage to finish a feature—Michael Schultz, Jamaa Fanaka, Bill Greaves, St. Clair Bourne, Stan Lathan to mention a few. But Hollywood, for all practical purposes, remained a lily-White fortress, the distributors (the all-

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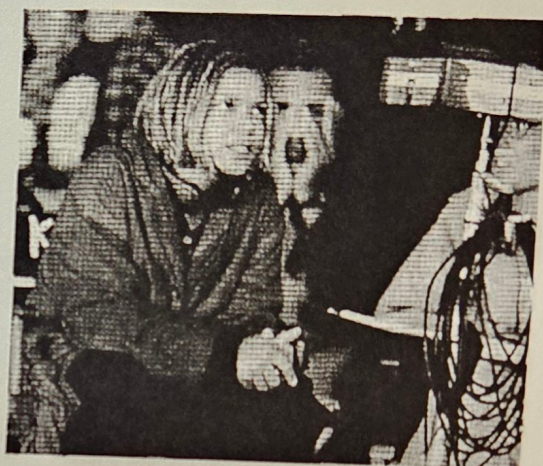
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1996: Cuba Gooding Jr. wins Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Jerry Maguire* at the 69th Annual Academy Awards.

1997: Spike Lee and Sam Pollard are nominated for best Documentary Feature film for *4 Little Girls* at the 70th Annual Academy Awards.

2001: Halle Berry wins Best Actress for her performance in *Monster's Ball* at the 74th Annual Academy Awards.

2001: Denzel Washington wins Best Actor for his performance in *Training Day* at the 74th Annual Academy Awards.

2001: Sidney Poitier wins an Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award at the 74th Annual Academy Awards.

2004: Jamie Foxx wins Best Actor for his performance in *Ray* at the 77th Academy Awards.

▼ **2004:** Morgan Freeman wins Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Million Dollar Baby* at the 77th Annual Academy Awards.



powerful gatekeepers of American cinema) would routinely low-ball the commercial value of a Black work while simultaneously attempting to confiscate the glory.

I waited and waited ... Blaxploitation petered out. Hollywood switched its sepia funding to "bedlam-in-the-hood" films.

I waited and waited. I was figuring just another Dream Deferred ... Then I hear a bugle blowing "Charge!" Here comes Spike Lee with *She's Gotta Have It*, and hot on his heels, the first wave of an endless army of young Black filmmakers—Robert Townsend, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Charles Burnett, my son Mario, Euzhan Palcy, the Hudlin Brothers. Not just directors, either, the whole shebang, courageous, highly skilled hordes of writers, producers, editors, et al, ready to take on "the Man."

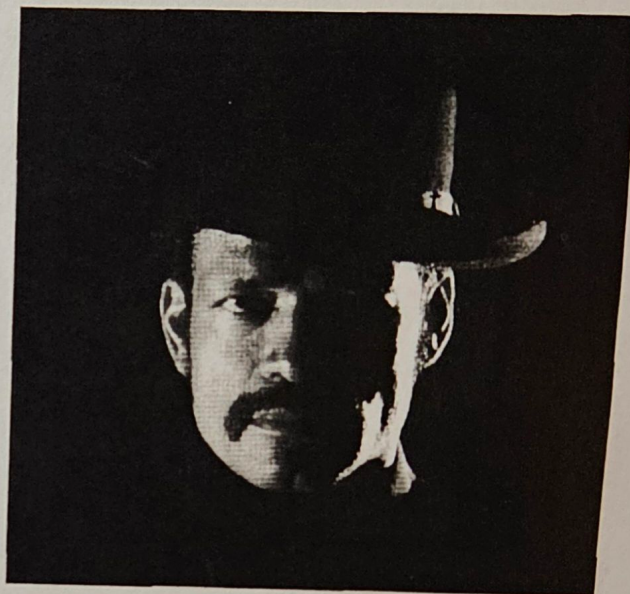
Like my Momma use to say, "He may not come when you call Him, but he's always right on time!"

And now, 60 years later since movies messed with my mind, there are Brothers and Sisters swarming all over the cinematic landscape, making all kinds of movies, from *Soul Food* to *Training Day*. Now we have, just to mention a few, Bill Duke, Neema Barnett, Charles Stone, Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* and her husband, Vondi Curtis-Hall's *Redemption*, Kevin Hooks' *Passenger 57* with a Black leading man in a White film, and F. Gary Gray making *The Italian Job*, another film full of White folks, too. And John Singleton not only directing features himself, but producing somebody else. We've even had a slew of Black actors beating out White actors for OSCARS—Denzel, Halle, Jamie, Morgan...

But the battle for equality is far from over what with "the ole Hollywood" hanging on for dear life, reluctant to relinquish an inch of the turf that it felt White skin is entitled to. In fact, to this day, there is not a person



Antoine Fuqua (r.) directed *Training Day*, the movie that yielded a Best Actor Oscar for Denzel Washington (c.). And Mario Van Peebles (below) has followed in his father's footsteps as an actor and director.



of color at any Hollywood studio who has the power to green light a movie (decide if a film gets made).

On the other hand, scientific advances (the Internet, tapes, cable TV, DVDs, etc.) have opened up additional avenues of access to the public and the once-all-powerful "gatekeepers" are not so powerful anymore. Plus, thanks to recent improvements in the field of digital technology, the actual cost of shooting a film has plummeted.

I wouldn't be surprised if in a little while—as soon as we catch our breath and have a chance to make a pit-stop or two and get the Hollywood way of telling a story out of our system—if we didn't come up with some whole new way of making movies. Why not—we invented jazz, didn't we? Why not—we invented the skyhook and the double-pump, too!

Me? I wouldn't be surprised if we weren't heading into a second Golden Age of Black cinema. □